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# Commedia dell'Arte, Masks and Masking: A Modern Application for the Production of Commedia Masks. An Independent Research and Application Process

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I'm just completing my fourth year as a dual theatre and education major. Through the interest created by my dual degree programs I have rekindled my love of sewing, embroidery, and general craftsmanship. The program for costume construction has given me the ability to find my focus in hopes that I may teach costume construction with an emphasis on fine detail work such as embroidery, beadwork, and mask making. This project

allowed me to venture into mask making (an entirely new area for me), possibly spurred on by a class on Japanese Embroidery that allowed me to realize I could attempt new avenues of costume construction. Professor Fields was unbelievably patient with my questions on research, formatting, and application techniques. His help was invaluable. It was a new process, not only making the masks but also writing about the history and process, it forced me to concentrate on my methods more than I ever have before.

The entire experience was priceless for me because it made me realize the difference between making and teaching. Because I love both the method and teaching portion I hope to use experiences such as these to formulate lessons for my students one day.

### Faculty Mentor: Professor Nelson Fields Theatre Department

This article combines research and application techniques for Commedia dell'Arte masks. The research portion explores one "mask" of a stock character called Pantalone and clarifies the cultural importance of the masks. The exploration emphasizes the significance in commedia of masks as both an accessory as well as a character type. My research provides background information about the masks, and then utilizes that information to develop techniques for modern mask-making. The techniques included range from plaster-impregnated bandage masks to dried leather. This variety of techniques gives the reader a choice of methods suited to various applications. These contemporary methods for making the masks differ from those of the original mask-makers. This article provides information for theatre students and artisans to create a workable modern commedia mask.

## Commedia dell'Arte, Masks and Masking: A Modern Application for the Production of Commedia Masks

An independent research  
and application process

### Introduction

The use of stock characters in commedia requires the individual identities of masks to be discernable immediately. When making a mask or teaching commedia in mask making it is important to understand the significance of those differences. This article gives a brief history of Commedia dell'Arte and an example of one of the stock characters, in addition to a main portion, which includes several at-home methods for making commedia masks. The history explains why each character's mask is so individualized, and why certain characteristics are reserved for specific characters. The application portion of the paper articulates methods of mask construction for this article, and is intended to be used for theatre productions or as teaching aides.

### History

In beginning any avenue of research one must begin with history. How does one trace a genre of drama that has few or no precisely written texts surviving? Such is the issue with tracing the history of Commedia dell'Arte, the 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian improvisational theatre. Improvisational theatre is a form of theatre less structured than traditionally scripted theatre. In the improv theatre of commedia, actors knew their character (hence the importance of stock characters) and, through knowing their character, they would know how that character related to the others in the piece. Generally, the commedia pieces were unscripted, meaning that the actors would receive a scenario just before performing — they might have up to two days to prepare — but their lines would be of their own making, as would the





**Figure 1**  
 Anonymous, *Pulcinella and Pantaloone*, engraving, mid-seventeenth century. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Cabinet des Estampes, Paris. (Lawner, 34)

physical action of the play. Little theory or influence can be completely ascribed to commedia, although it is highly influential in many contemporary and future forms of drama such as Shakespeare's *Othello*,

*Othello* as a performance before a theatrically-versed Renaissance audience, for whom Iago's and Othello's improvisational modes, in conjunction with the stylization of the major characters...would have enforced an illusion of the play as a performance of Italian *commedia dell'arte* dell'improvviso (Faherty, 1991, p. 179).

Commedia is difficult to accurately depict, because its existence consisted of improvisational sketches. The improvisational nature of commedia precludes the existence of extensive documentation. Even in translating "Commedia dell'Arte" scholars are at odds; "the name *commedia dell'arte* is difficult to translate. Literally it approximates 'comedy of the artists,' implying performances by professionals as distinguished from the courtly amateurs" (Kahan, 1976, p. 7). Although there are several books of "lazzis," a term used to describe actions attributed to a certain character, they are difficult to cite or learn from because each commedia performance would depend on producing an alteration of that scenario. Examples of this would be the character of Doctore making wide and sweeping gestures when



**Figure 2**  
 A sixteenth-century *Pantalone* from the *Recueil Fossard*, National Museum, Stockholm (Rudlin, 93)

speaking, or Pantalone constantly fiddling with his money bag — generally any characteristic movement, gesture, or stance that can only be connected to a single character or character type.

Commedia itself has shifting theories of its origination. Three older theories of origination include a theory of mime ancestry “concerning their putative Roman father,” one “hypothesis that makes the masks direct descendents of comic personages in the mystery plays,” and finally one that “traces back *commedia dell'arte* motifs and figures into the folk literature of the middle ages” (Smith, 1912, p. 21). In juxtaposition with this trio of ideas, Smith favors a theory of the evolution of commedia,

*commedia dell'arte* might better try to account for itself by looking about in the sixteenth century where it first comes to consciousness ... carnival dances, folk plays, courtly mythological spectacles, moral allegories and sacred legends all satisfied some of the general demands for amusement, and each in turn contributed to something toward the education of those wandering entertainers ... gradually the players formed themselves into guilds whose prerogative was acting ... thus only after the middle of the sixteenth century do *commedia dell'arte* as we know them — outline plots filled by extempore dialog — begin to be recorded (Smith, 1912, p. 27).

Those 16<sup>th</sup> century records are the sources to which most commedia scholars are first drawn. However, if a researcher is more inclined to the mask aspect of commedia, then period art sources and art referencing performances and characters are more useful than texts. The characters are one of the most central portions to commedia, in which the performances were improvisational but characters were well established stock creations.

Stock characters are the portion of commedia about which the most is known. The characters are repeated in every artifact left by commedia — scene books, paintings, and advertisements. Their presence



Figure 3

An engraving from Johann Balthasar's *The Loves of Pantaloone and Harlequin*, 1729. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Cabinet des Estampes, Paris. (Lawner, 125)

is best preserved in the individualized masks created to represent the qualities of each character. Because of the sources such as paintings and advertisements, the most is known about the physical representation of the stock characters. The most notorious character is Pantalone (see figures 1-3) the father figure in commedia. “He typically wants to marry the same woman as his son Flavio, or is too mean to provide a dowry for his daughter, Isabella” (Rudin, 1994, p. 95). Pantalone is physically characterized as having a “back that bends ... giving him an old man’s stoop, protecting his purse and penis and effectively restricting the motion of the legs. The feet are together, toes apart, knees well bent and facing apart” (Rudin, 1994, p. 93). However, the most notable portion of each character is the mask, in Pantalone’s case, characterized as “long, hooked nose, with bushy eyebrows, sometimes also a moustache. Pointed beard juts forward as if to meet the nose coming down, thus giving a very dynamic profile” (Rudin, 1994, p. 93). These depictions can be seen in art work of the commedia period containing the characters as well as the reproduction of masks by mask makers.



## Practical Application

In the practical application section we will detail several attempted production methods for commedia masks. The practical creation of the commedia masks for this project required several attempts that included leather production and various types of plaster bases. Assessment of the processes for theatre application included weight, durability, aesthetics, duration of the production of the mask, ease of production, and flexibility in design. Methods that were deficient in several areas were assessed to be possible learning tools rather than to be used in a theatre setting.

### ***Sculpy®* Masks**

One method of producing the masks for theatre and teaching purposes is through the use of commercially produced *Sculpy®*. This product is one of many home-oven bake clays found at local and chain craft stores. The process for producing a mask this way is fairly simple; however the masks are not as light-weight and durable as those needed for repeated stage performances. The product of this process is more suitable for presentations and as a learning tool.

The first step in producing a mask from *Sculpy®* is to create a base out of aluminum foil. Depending on which mask you are attempting to replicate, the initial base has a variety of shapes, some including only the forehead and round nose, such as Doctore, while others require the entire upper face and long nose, such as Pantalone. With the foil, you create the curve of the mask as well; an easy technique to achieve this curve is to simply press the tin-foil over the curve of your own face. This gives you the horizontal curve of the mask so that it fits the face from ear to ear. At this point you may also append foil additions to support the clay structure and allow for a thinner covering of clay — for wrinkles a small roll of foil tapered at the ends and curved into a smile shape works well.

The next step is to apply the *Sculpy®* to the base (see figure 4). For the fastest bake time and lightest mask, the clay should be as thin as possible, approximately 2 mm flat. When applying the clay you can roll out a flattened piece large enough to cover the entire base, or at least one side, and fit that over the base pushing it into grooves and crevices with your fingers or small wooden clay-working tools (see figure 5). After the base is completely covered, all the cracks and overlay lines are smoothed together using your fingers or the same wooden tools, in whatever combination works most effectively



**Figure 4: *Sculpy®* and tin foil molding**



**Figure 5: Wooden tools for shaping and molding clay**

for you. Next, bake the model, using the temperature and time recommendations on the product you have chosen.

Most people underestimate the thickness of their model, but the model can be returned to the oven for more bake time even after it has cooled. Once the model has been baked and allowed to cool with proper ventilation it is ready for cosmetic coloring or the application of facial hair. For low-budget productions, loose cotton such as a pulled apart cotton ball can be applied with glue for convincing eyebrows, mustache, or a beard. For those productions requiring more detail, portions cut from old wigs and applied with an adhesive also create the desired effect. If the model is desired for display, a finishing technique that emphasizes the molding of the mask includes applying ceramic antiquing and then finishing with an acrylic fixative.

After attempting this process — one of producing a mask made primarily of *Sculpy*®, I determined that it is not the most effective process for stage use. The mask



*Figure 6: Unbaked Sculpy® mask*

resulting from this process is light-weight enough, and appears durable enough for stage use; however the process of using a foil base leaves the mask less molded to the face than is desirable for performance. The mask is too flat (see figure 6), standing out on the sides/cheeks, which leaves too much room between the mask and the performer. This tin foil based process may be suggested for beginning mask-makers, to grasp an introductory



*Figure 7: Wire frame*

idea of shaping and molding, however, it is decidedly better as a learning tool than a costuming process.

### Paper-Mâché Masks

The second method attempted was a paper-mâché product with a wire skeleton (see figure 7). This was another attempt to make the mask construction viable as an at-home activity. Once the wire support base was completed I realized that it would not give the desired look for the masks. The paper-mâché would have been too ridged, leaving an undesirable texture, and the product would likely have been too easily damaged for theatre use.

### Plaster Cast Methods — Base

The next several methods contain the same initial preparation. This preparation requires a plaster cast of the actor's face on which to mold the mask. Materials include plaster-impregnated bandages (available at most local medical supply stores), Plaster of Paris (craft stores), a stocking, and petroleum jelly. Next find your model — generally the best practice is to use the actor who will be playing the part as the model, so that the





**Figure 8 (model Beth Daniels): Making face mold negative**



**Figure 9: Negative mold and face cast**

mask is formed for his or her face exactly. It is important the model or actor remain still (including facial features) for the space of 15 minutes (see figure 8). He or she should also not be claustrophobic.

To prepare your model, first firmly fix hair away from the face, and then cover with the stocking. When placing the stocking, make sure any seams are not on the face or forehead because they will cause undesirable crevices in the mold. Next, gently coat your model's face with the petroleum jelly, paying particular attention to eyebrows, the sensitive skin around the eye, and under the chin as far back as the Adam's apple (or a similar location on a female). Before applying any of the bandages it is desirable to have them pre-cut. Bandages generally come in rolls 6 inches wide. For application on the average human face you can safely pre-cut bandages to 3 inches

wide and 14 inches long (they can be trimmed once applied to suit the specific location). Considering the three layer minimum necessary, you should pre-cut at least 25 to 30 bandage strips, as well as 5 to 10 smaller pieces for patching. Next, follow the instructions on your packaging of plaster bandages (generally to immerse, squeeze and apply).

You will be covering the face from ear to ear, and from the crown of the head to under the chin. Start with a vertical layer of strips, and then a horizontal one, and finally a finishing vertical layer; with each layer make sure to smooth the plaster of the bandages until completely smooth. One important note is to leave the nostrils uncovered, most simply achieved by ending a strip of bandage at the tip of the nose, then beginning a new one under the nostrils. Upon beginning with the first layer of application the model must remain completely still, because any movement under the bandages will cause loss of detail and bubbling in the mold. Coupled with this stillness, the person applying the plaster-bandages must take extra care to press the bandages firmly into natural crevices in the face — including areas around the eyes, the crease in the lip, and any others. After the plaster has dried (most



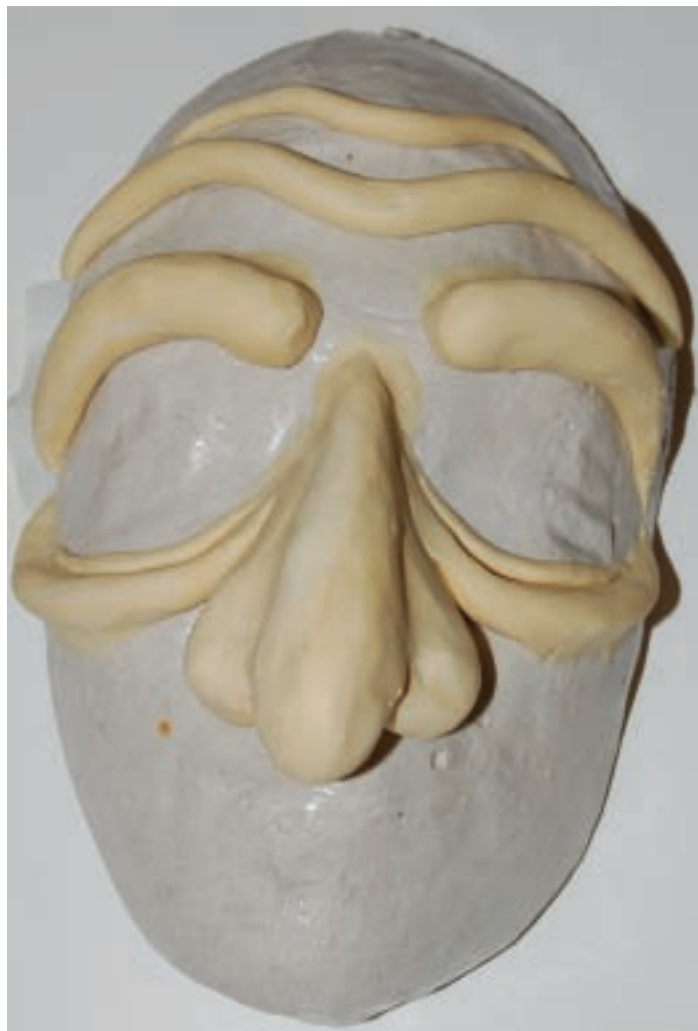
Figure 10: Face cast and soft clay additions

easily determined by the model), lean the model forward and have him or her alternate facial features — anything to stretch or loosen cheeks, mouth, and forehead — until the mask loosens and falls off (*into someone's hands*).

After the mold has dried for at least 6 hours, cover the nostril holes. This mold will require some hours to dry completely (generally in the area of 24 to 48 hours depending on the brand of bandage). During the drying process, once it has been removed from the model's face, the mold will need to be set in something rigid such as a shoebox with fabric or tissue to pad the curves, to retain its shape.

When the mold is completely dry, follow the mixing directions on the Plaster of Paris, cover the inside of the mold with petroleum jelly, then fill the mold at least past the corner of the eye by  $\frac{3}{4}$  to 1 inch. You may fill the mold as much as possible without causing it to overflow. When the plaster is dry (generally 48 or more hours) peel the bandage from the plaster, do not attempt to pull the plaster out or it is likely to crack and fracture. Then, allow the plaster cast to completely dry. (see figure 9). You now have a structure to which you can append clay additions (see figures 10 & 11), over which you can stretch and mold leather, plaster, and felted mask materials. This structure will be used and referred as the "base" in the next several projects unless otherwise stated.

Figure 11: Complete mask features







*Figure 12: Soft leather molding*



*Figure 13: Soft leather drying*

## Plaster Cast Methods — Leather Chamois

The first process attempted on this base was a mask produced from leather chamois. In the effort to produce a light-weight leather mask, the chamois was selected for its malleability and stretch. The leather is first soaked, for a minimum of 48 hours. The leather is then placed over the base, and stretched using fingers and a smooth wooden tool (see figure 12). The leather is stretched by repeatedly and gently pushing it into the crevices formed by the mold. Because of the properties of some leathers, when it dries it will retain the shape achieved when wet. After the leather has achieved the shape desired, it must be allowed to dry (see figure 13). This drying can be achieved in either of two ways; if time is not a concern, letting the leather air-dry is completely appropriate; however, if time is an issue, then the leather may also be dried using a heat source. A portable hair dryer works effectively. Once the leather is completely dry you apply a hardening agent. Hat sizing would be recommended, however this attempt was made with glue in the effort to discover at-home products for use. Apply the glue while the leather is still stretched over the base (I used Modge Podge® and a neutral pH adhesive by Lineco, Inc. at full strength). Allow to dry completely then remove from the form.

This process — the use of leather chamois — is again not meant for theatre application. The product is flimsy, too soft, and does not hold its own shape well enough for wear-ability (see figure 14). The mask does not retain the contours of the face; it flattens out and loses form. Although the process could be used to demonstrate beginning techniques of leather stretching, the product is unsuitable for theatre uses.

*Figure 14: Loose soft leather*



## Plaster Cast Methods — Traditional Leather

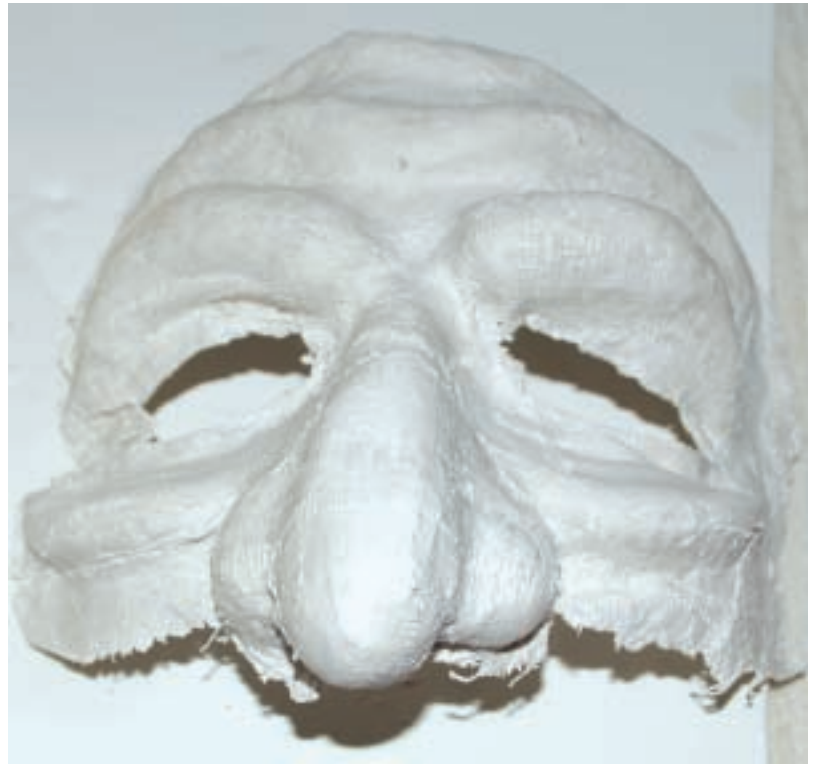
The next leather product attempted was traditional leather, approximately 1/8<sup>th</sup> inch thick. As with the chamois, this leather was soaked for over 48 hours prior to application. The leather was stretched over the same base and molded with the same finger techniques as before. The leather remained too thick and stiff for easy malleability. The next attempt was to stitch the leather across the back of the base, drawing it tight with the stitches. This process was also not responsive enough to produce any viable results. The thicker leather did not respond to cold-water soaking and hand working.

## Plaster Cast Methods — Various Finishes

After these adequate but not entirely desirable results, the production method was shifted to working on a plaster mask base and applying various finishes to that base. The base was formed of the same plaster-impregnated bandage material as the mold had been earlier. The bandages were applied to the sculpted face and allowed to dry on the “base” for 15-20 minutes (follow the drying instruction time on the packaging). After the mask base is dry to the touch — it often feels slightly damp or cool as well — it must be carefully pried off the facial base. To complete this step without damaging the face or the mask is tricky and, after several failed attempts, it appears that the best process is that one should pry up the edges of the mask using a slender metal prying tool (a butter knife or a piece of metal boning will do the trick). Once the forehead, cheeks, and areas around the eye are loose from the facial base, the rest will generally lift off easily (see figure 15).

The only major problem with this method is that, more often than not, the clay pieces applied to the facial base will come off in the bandage mask. This is not an issue because the clay pieces can be easily removed from the mask and reattached to the molded base. However, this rough treatment causes the clay pieces to have a shorter life-span. After two or three applications they will need to be replaced by newly molded pieces.

After the bandage mask has been removed from the facial base it must be allowed to dry for an additional 24 hours before any finishing products can be applied. After that drying period has elapsed, it is recommended that the mask be covered with 2-3 layers of gesso (found at any local craft store). This covering will smooth the finish of the mask as well as strengthen it. Once the gesso is dry, the mask-maker can trim the edges of the mask base to refine the shape of the mask. Once this is complete, the mask base is prepared and finishing techniques may be applied. In addition to this finish of



*Figure 15: Plaster-infused bandage mask base*

gesso, you may choose to provide extra support at the edge of the mask with the use of wire reinforcement (see figure 16). The wire will strengthen the edge without adding bulk or inhibiting the application of finishes. In this process the wire was affixed with Elmers Glue® and held in place by clothes pins until the adhesive dried.

One of the many finishing techniques that can be applied to this construction method is applying paint, antiquing, or another color medium directly to the mask base. In this example the medium used was a brown shoe polish, available in any local shoe store that carries leather dress shoes. This type of finish is



*Figure 16: Wire backing on the plaster bandage base*





*Figure 17: Beginning shoe polish finishing*



*Figure 18: Shoe polish finishing complete*

applied by rag or bush, a heavy coat is put on covering the front surface of the mask, then, before the polish begins to dry, excess is wiped away with a rag, which leaves crevices darker and exaggerates the features of the mask. Because the shoe polish dries and clumps rapidly it is best to apply it to small sections of the mask at a time (see figure 17). If applied to the whole mask at once the result tends to appear blotchy and uneven.

The same technique of brushing and wiping is used for the application of antiquing (generally found with ceramic finishing supplies). If possible, allow the polish to dry for 24 hours before applying a fixative. You may use acrylic fixative or a spray lacquer, which can be found in a variety of finishes from matt to super shiny (your choice should depend on the use of the mask; one used in a show with lots of artificial lighting should have a matte finish to decrease light glare; one used in a class-room setting could use a shiny finish to attract more attention — again it will depend on the use of the mask). Spray the mask with the fixative following directions on the packaging, assuring that you have proper ventilation.

Once the lacquer or fixative is dry, you may affix the strap or elastic band to the interior sides of the mask with super-glue, and adhesive tape for single uses, or by applying more of the plaster bandage over the straps to imbed them in the mask. If the plaster bandage is crumbling around the edges of the mask, you may want to finish the edges with either a wax seal or simple glue seal. Just spread the seal with your fingers around the edge of the mask and it reduces the crumbling.

Because the original (16<sup>th</sup> century) masks were made almost solely out of hardened leather, this modern method produces a somewhat stylized mask (see figure 18), however, even that stylization suits the overall style of most commedia pieces because it is not unlike a painted leather mask. Also, with this method the characteristics of characters may be even more exaggerated by the use of color and texture on the mask. This process does create a very textural mask that would be inappropriate for more glamorous occasions, unless deeply finished with gesso or sanding until the texture was removed. It is still somewhat fragile, but is definitely capable of withstanding two weeks (possibly longer) of the run of a show with careful handling. As with all hand-made accessories, proper care must be maintained to ensure the safety of the piece.



## Plaster Cast Methods — Fabric Finishes

The next technique includes the affixing of a fabric to the surface of the bandage mask. Choice of fabric is integral in this method, because different fabrics have positive and negative traits with regard to stiffness, stretch, texture, and weave. The desired fabric should be thin enough to not over-fill the creases of the mask-face; stretchy so that it can be pulled taut around the mask; have a texture that enhances the look of the mask, rather than detracting from it; and have a weave that does not interfere with the wrapping of the mask, nor how the fabric fits into the grooves of the mask-face.

Once the fabric has been selected, it is time for the application. Before applying the fabric to the whole face, take several small scraps and glue them to the edges of the eye-holes, this is to prevent the mask-base from showing through because when you poke out the eyes, the fabric will not overlap, but rather it will spread apart. It is simpler to cover the edges before applying the fabric. Once these areas are dry you may move on to the over-all fabric covering. The mask base will first be covered with a thin layer of clear-drying glue (again, I used Elmers Glue® for the attachment and Modge Podge® for a stiffening agent). The layer should be thin enough so that it does not soak through the fabric but thick enough to ensure that the fabric will remain affixed. The glue may be applied by hand or with a brush, but it must evenly coat the front of the mask base. Once the glue has become tacky (immediately for glues such as Elmers®, longer for slower drying glues), lay the fabric over the mask — ensure that you have over an inch excess on each edge — and press down into the crevices with fingers (see figure 19). Avoiding excess glue is important, because if it soaks through the fabric, it will bond to the fingertips during this step, and the fabric will pull away from the mask base. Allow the glue to dry completely.

Next, wrap the excess fabric around to the back of the mask, gluing it along the edge to prevent the mask base from crumbling as well as to avoid fraying of the fabric. When necessary, you may slit the fabric up to the edge of the mask, so that the overlap may lie over itself gently. The main trouble spot in this step is near the nose (if the nose has nostrils attached) when the fabric is slit (as in the eye holes) it will spread apart rather than overlap. This spreading can be a serious issue if your chosen fabric does not blend easily together, so avoid recognizably patterned fabrics and all those with prints when first attempting this process. If you slit

*Figure 19: Beginning faux-leather fabric covering*





*Figure 20:*  
*Velveteen fabric*  
*covering*



*Figure 21: Faux-leather mask complete*



the fabric near the nostrils and see that it is beginning to spread, cut another scrap and place it under the slit, covering the exposed area, then continue gluing.

In gluing, you may find it necessary to temporarily hold the fabric down while the glue dries, binder-clips or clothes pins are useful, if used not directly touching anything soaked with glue, and carefully applied so that they do not crumble the edge of the base. Once the fabric has dried around the edges of the mask, open the eyes of your mask by slitting the fabric covering them and gluing down the edges as before. When this step is complete, you may affix an elastic band or straps by sewing them on. This can be achieved by drilling small holes through the edge of the mask and sewing through the holes. Be careful not to drill too near the edge or it will crumble.

With this method, the first fabric attempted was a velveteen cloth (see figure 20), although being admirably suited because it was soft, stretchy, and malleable, the fabric resulted in an undesirable product, because the “heaviness” of the texture made the lines and creases in the mask undetectable. Although the mask

is aesthetically pleasing, the luster of this fabric causes most of the detailing wrinkles to be lost. This result is undesirable for theatre use but might be acceptable for costume parties in which the mask is closer to the audience.

The second fabric attempted was a faux-leather mottled and thin fabric (see figure 21). It filled all the requirements being stretchy, thin, malleable, and the texture did not distract but rather enhanced the look of the finished piece. Although this fabric does not entirely mimic leather, it gives the impression of a leather product, while adding a texture not present in real leather. Another positive aspect of this fabric is that it does not ravel easily and, therefore, concern about the edges unraveling is minimal for the course of one production.

## Conclusion

The fabric-covered plaster mask appears to be the most adaptable to theatre use. Covered with the faux-leather fabric it had the most appealing look. It was also the best combination of durability and weight. This article contains a number of methods for mask construction; at least one should be suitable for whatever requirements you may need. Most of the methods can be altered to suit other environments, such as teaching or outdoor theatre with little modification. Some methods were found to be more suited as teaching aides, while others appear to fulfill the requirements of active stage use. The coupling of research with technique is required when one is searching for new ways to produce replicas of older articles, and that research is also bound to give researchers ideas on how known techniques can be adapted to apply to their avenue of application.

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I would like to give thanks first to Nelson Fields, my faculty mentor for this project. Without his support I would not have completed the task I set myself. He is truly an inspiration. Also thanks to Robert Haven for making me aware that I was capable of this kind of work, and to Rhoda Gale-Pollack for having piqued my interest in ancient masks and mask-making, Beth Daniels for being my mold-model (even if she couldn't stop talking which resulted in my mold having no defined lips), and Jason Lambert for helping with some of the photography and whatever else I needed. Special thanks to my mother for starting my interest in sewing and everything creative. Also, the entire Theatre Department at the University of Kentucky has contributed to my interest and ability for these projects. Thanks to all. And especially thanks to everyone who continues to believe in me.

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